

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A proposed model for the continued professionalisation of student affairs in Africa

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### *Abstract*

This article presents a model that can inform the continued professionalisation of student affairs as both a field and a practice in Africa. After providing a brief overview of the African post-secondary educational climate and establishing student affairs as an internationally recognised profession, I analyse three pieces authored or co-authored by Mirko Noordegraaf (2003; 2007; 2011) that develop the concepts of socially constructed professionalism, management of practices-in-transition and hybrid professionalism. I then employ these concepts to create a professionalisation model that incorporates an awareness of the complex and diverse nature of African student affairs work. I next examine two key areas present across the modern African post-secondary environment – career education and distance learning – and discuss how the model can guide student affairs professionalisation and practice when working in these important educational spaces. I conclude by briefly commenting on the potential for practitioners in the African context to develop new pathways forward for the international student affairs community.

### *Keywords*

*student affairs, career education, distance learning, professionalisation.*

### *Introduction*

Post-secondary education in Africa, whether occurring on university campuses (Lindow, 2012), online (Simmons, Mbarika, Mbarika, Thomas, Tsuma, Wade & Wilkerson, 2011) or through other forms of open distance learning (Lephala & Makoe, 2012), is on the rise. Recently, institutions across the continent have seen an increased demand for post-secondary education due to a multitude of factors. These include the further incorporation of higher education into national development strategies (Cloete, Bailey, Pillay, Bunting & Maassen, 2011; Kanyengo, 2009; Pillay, 2010), increased international investment (Lindow, 2012), and a rapid growth in population ages 15–24 termed the ‘youth bulge’ (Agbor, Taiwo

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& Smith, 2012). As African post-secondary education grows, the demand for individuals trained to provide comprehensive student services will increase. These individuals, described by Chickering and Reisser (1993) as the “mortar” to the teaching faculty “brick” (p. 427), are essential at a time when learning is encouraged outside of the classroom (Blake, 2007). They hold additional importance in educational climates where the emphasis is placed on holistic student development (Idogho, 2011; UNESCO, 2002) and student populations continue to grow and diversify (Lumadi & Mampuru, 2010).

In the African context, student affairs professionals can play vital roles in the daily lives of students and institutions. For example, Idogho (2011) argued that African tertiary institutions should utilise student affairs practitioners to implement an array of comprehensive initiatives. These consist of an orientation programme for all new students and their parents; an academic success programme encompassing residential education and the building of public/private partnerships with real estate companies; a counselling programme focused on interpersonal relationships, adjustment to college, study skills and career development; a student health and wellness programme aimed at helping students reach their optimum levels “physically, intellectually, emotionally, morally, socially and spiritually” (p. 274); and an academic advising programme specifically targeted at providing first-year students with individualised attention.

Of course, it is one thing to propose programmes in the name of greater student success and often entirely another matter to implement them. In scenarios of both economic challenge (Kayengo, 2009) and educational expansion (Ofori-Attah, 2010), post-secondary institutions may feel pressured to increase enrolments without necessarily providing additional support services to new and persisting students. As the call for papers for this publication illustrates, though, the tide is turning towards an increase in the education and support of student affairs professionals across Africa. I believe this growth is necessary as student affairs practitioners can serve as the ‘mortar’ of African higher education in three integrated areas across a wide variety of institutional contexts. First, professionals who develop shared bases of knowledge can collaborate to develop practices that best meet the needs of students (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007). Second, professionals can continue to conduct research on student learning and development in the African context that may directly inform institutional and national decision-making and resource allocation. Finally, they can aid in the utilisation of post-secondary education as a mechanism for career development (Watson & McMahon, 2009) and poverty reduction through upward social and economic mobility (Borode, 2011; Asmal & James, 2001; Gyimah-Brempong, Paddison & Mitiku, 2006) by emphasising professional development throughout the co-curriculum (Chan & Derry, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to present a model that can inform the continued professionalisation of student affairs in Africa. I have chosen to build a model in the hope that it will provide those charged with training new practitioners, as well as those currently practising, with a tool to aid in the continued evolution of the profession as it crosses institutions and national borders. To create this model, I first situate African student affairs

within the context of recent scholarship surrounding professionalism. I then construct the model based around central themes of dynamism and flexibility. I next discuss two areas where African practitioners can translate this model into action: career education and distance learning. I close with reflections on how the African student affairs context may inform practice internationally.

### *A model for student affairs professionalisation*

Student affairs work can be broken down into three categories: entering services, supporting services and culminating services (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 438). Each of these areas presents opportunities for researchers to better understand learners and institutions as well as for practitioners to assist each student in his/her academic and personal success (UNESCO, 2002). Working in these areas must also be cast against challenges that exist throughout African education such as lack of funding, historical inequality, political instability, disease and outdated technology (Lindow, 2012).

In a 2002 report titled *The Role of Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education*, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) emphasised the importance of student affairs in the international expansion and success of higher education. The report clearly stated that student affairs must be understood as a profession and that trained professionals be considered experts on student development and educational environments. In making this claim the authors also highlighted a need for professionals to develop standards of practice and behaviour through such measures as formalised education and preparation, ongoing professional development, assessment of student outcomes, and creation of management strategies (p.13). The debate surrounding professionalism, then, should not focus on whether student affairs is or is not a profession; it should instead focus on how to best professionalise practitioners (Evetts, 2011) in order to meet the needs of their students. I argue that a model of professionalisation sensitive to the three core dimensions of student affairs work (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) yet adaptable to the variety of contexts found within African higher education can guide the development of the profession called for by UNESCO.

### *Constructed professionalism*

Student affairs professionals operate in what Brint (2001) termed the professional services sector. In this capacity, Brint (2001) argued, they stand poised to make far greater contributions to the performance of their organisations than technology and other non-personnel factors. However, as members of a growing profession in a rapidly changing societal and educational landscape (Lindow, 2011; Milliken, 2004), emerging and current student affairs practitioners must develop themselves and their field (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007).

A starting point for the conversation surrounding this second, wider sense of 'professional development' at the field level can be found in the work of Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011). In their paper, the authors developed a theory of professionalism anchored in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and suggest:

Perhaps we should treat professionalism as a dynamic concept, as a verb instead of a noun – ‘professionalisation’ – and not a static concept with generic, fixed and universal features ... Changing societies will experience the continuous manufacturing of professionalism. That is, they will experience *process* in which ideals of professionalism are (re)constructed. (p. 84)

Interpreting Bourdieu, Schnikel and Noordegraaf (2011) argue in favour of understanding a profession as an entity existing in a state of constant construction by its stakeholders. In outlining this process of construction, termed professionalisation, the authors further claim that groups of professionals are capable of taking actions to further their social recognition and expand the practices that fall within their domain. The authors also advance the idea that professionalisation processes must incorporate an awareness of social histories and the value placed on professional actions in different societies (Schnikel & Noordegraaf, 2011).

The idea that professions are built and changed over time – which I label constructed professionalism – is certainly relevant to the African student affairs context. Lumadi and Mampuru (2010) argue that student affairs divisions must adapt as institutions change their missions, expand their programmes, and make decisions about resource allocation as institutions enter the 21st century (Milliken, 2004). I would further suggest that some of these changes may include, but are in no way limited to, deeper participation in policy development (Ibara, 2012), expansion of student-facing services (Idogho, 2011), and partnerships with faculty (Blake, 2007).

### ***Practices-in-transition***

The field of student affairs in Africa must constantly craft responses to complex issues that exist in the lives of students and educational systems. In their 2003 paper, Noordegraaf and Abma address the management of issues where professionals are asked to weigh in based on their experiences and where assessment of their work can be difficult to measure. The authors next develop a typology of practices for understanding how complex issues are addressed that I believe is useful for understanding student affairs professionalisation (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003).

This typology describes three types of practices used when managing issues – termed canonical, practices-in-transition and non-canonical – and allows for movement between the three depending on context. Canonical practices refer to management in settings with low ambiguity where quantitative measurements can be applied to determine success. One such canonical practice present in post-secondary education is course registration due to its firm measurability and clear performance indicators. Non-canonical practices, on the other hand, exist in highly ambiguous situations and bring in a diverse variety of stakeholders. An example of these practices for our purposes may be the management of resources to answer larger-scale social questions such as: How can poverty reduction occur in sub-Saharan Africa? While student affairs practitioners may play a role in answering this large question, the management of this issue requires insight from multiple perspectives and responses may develop over a long period of time (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003; Borode, 2011).

It is the middle ground, termed practices-in-transition, which may be most useful to the professionalisation of student affairs practitioners. As Noordegraaf and Abma (2003) explain:

Practices-in-transition may revolve around complex issues that are difficult to answer, but as such which are known and relatively uncontested. In that case, experts become active, finding out what issues are about, and they disagree about the nature of problems and the adequacy of solutions. (p. 866)

Many issues confronting management in the student affairs domain fall into this category. For example, issues surrounding how best to deliver services laid out by Idogho (2011) at the outset of this paper represent practices-in-transition. When asked at the institutional level, questions requiring the management of these practices may include: How does our university create an orientation programme that effectively meets the needs of incoming students? What programmes and environments may facilitate student wellness on our campus? What type of academic advisement services do our students need and how can these be optimally delivered? The answers to these questions are undoubtedly complex. However, understood through the framework of practices-in-transition, answers can be developed by experts able to formulate and test hypotheses as well as use quantitative and qualitative data to measure programme effectiveness. Further building on the concept of practices-in-transition (Noordegraaf & Abma, 2003), solutions can be conceptualised and implemented by teams of trained professionals able to ethically disagree on how to best manage resources and negotiate to determine the optimal measures of effectiveness.

### *Hybrid professionalism*

As an emerging field, student affairs in Africa must continually negotiate its relationship with the outside world and legitimise its work to external constituencies (Fournier, 1999; Evetts 2011). In a third paper, Noordegraaf (2007) focuses attention on different strains of professionalism that exist in the contemporary workforce. He suggests that in pure professionalism, notions of 'professional' are limited to traditional fields (e.g. medicine) and new professions are not considered in the same way because they lack explicit structures and controls. In hybrid professionalism, however, professionals are understood more expansively to be reflective practitioners who take into account service to the world beyond their domain. These practitioners establish linkages between their work and the world outside and search for an occupational identity with an awareness of the tradeoffs that exist between personal needs, professional claims and organised action both within and outside institutional parameters (pp. 779–780). In short, hybrid professionalism is less focused on creating firm structures that govern the control of who is and is not a professional and is instead geared towards establishing as professionals those who work in contexts where decisions are made based upon standards that are domain-specific yet subtle and interpretive (p. 779).

***Proposed model for continued student affairs professionalisation in Africa***

Taken as a trio, I argue that these three constructs informed largely by the work of Noordegraaf – constructed professionalism, practice-in-transition and hybrid professionalism – can form a model for the continued professionalisation of student affairs in Africa (Table 1).

**Table 1: Proposed model for continued student affairs professionalisation in Africa**

Theoretical concept	Contribution to model
Constructed professionalism	Professionalisation as dynamic and evolving process Professions responsive to needs of changing societies
Practice-in-transition	Hypothesis testing to understand complex issues Negotiated measurement and ethical disagreement
Hybrid professionalism	Engagement with outside world for collective action Experts enabled to make informed decisions

As the demands placed on African post-secondary education by its stakeholders experience shifts, so too will the work required of student affairs. The requirements for data collection, as well as where responsibility falls for collection and interpretation of data, may also vary significantly. This model addresses these differences by maintaining a high degree of flexibility for institutions and individuals while also establishing a consistent backbone that can guide ongoing professionalisation. This flexibility is essential in an educational landscape marked by a broad range of student needs, institutional resources, political dynamics and state-level initiatives aimed at engineering change within post-secondary educational environments (UNECA, 2011). While what becomes termed ‘student affairs’ in different locales may not be precisely the same, the model will consistently provide guidance to emerging and current practitioners charged with facilitating student transitions into, through, and out of post-secondary education (Idogho, 2011; Chickering and Reisser, 1993) as well as to the field writ large as it experiences growth and change (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007).

The model additionally recognises that student affairs practitioners utilise their professional competencies to create changes within their institutions while also encouraging them to partner with external stakeholders to generate broader social action. These internal and external partnerships can be directed, for example, towards serving the economic function of post-secondary education (Winch, 2002) by helping more students learn and then earn. Partnerships can also be directed towards measures that encourage retention and persistence when learning happens away from campus (Lephala & Makoe, 2012; Ibara, 2012).

In the next section, I discuss how this model can be operationalised in the context of two challenges facing student affairs practitioners in Africa: providing effective career education, and engaging students in distance learning environments. I have chosen these

two because I believe they are the best examples of how the model may be incorporated into student affairs professionalisation in order to help practitioners provide services that are vital to students across the continent.

### *Practical implications: career education and distance learning*

#### **Career education**

The increase in Africa's youth (15–24) population prompts the question, asked by Agbor, Taiwo and Smith (2012), of whether this shift in demography presents a social dividend in the form of economic growth or a disaster marked by sharp unemployment. Higher education (Borode, 2011; Cloete *et al.*, 2011; Pillay, 2010; Maree, 2009) is frequently cited as a key ingredient in moving the needle away from unemployment and poverty and towards employment and economic development. Though steps in this direction certainly emerge from government planning (Cloete *et al.*, 2011) and more market-based curriculum alterations (Agbor, Taiwo & Smith, 2012; Borode, 2011), professional student affairs staff may play an essential role in the career education of students enrolled in higher education.

In their 2002 report, UNESCO clearly outlined career services as a functional area within student affairs charged primarily with providing career counselling and helping students effectively transition from school to work. In career offices, practitioners frequently serve both as career counsellors helping students navigate their own professional development processes (Watson & McMahon, 2009; Maree, 2009) and career educators providing students with the necessary information to make informed decisions about career opportunities (Chan & Derry, 2013). With specific regard to the African context, Borode (2011) argues that all institutions should “integrate [...] career counselling initiatives” and that “providing proper guidance to the students for helping them choose the right career cannot be over-emphasised” (p. 153). Borode (2011) further suggests that undergraduates be given a clear knowledge of how their degree fits into the marketplace in order to make the most immediate impact on their economies and participate in personal and communal wealth creation.

Understanding this relationship between higher education and employment (Pillay, 2010), how can African student affairs respond as a profession? I argue that there are two opportunities for continued professionalisation to take place with respect to this area based on the model (Table 2). First, professionals must be encouraged to develop career counselling strategies and career education models that meet the specific demands of their educational climates. While researching career development in South Africa, Maree (2009) reflects on the dilemma between adopting North American career counselling models versus generating models that may work better in developing countries. He concludes that, “the answer probably lies in a compromise: we need to build on what has been researched elsewhere, conduct our own research and develop an approach that is best suited to our own idiosyncratic needs” (p. 442). In terms of the model, trained practitioners need to be in a position to apply practice-in-transition management to career counselling and education.

**Table 2: Practical implications of model**

Theoretical concept	Career education	Distance learning
Constructed professionalism	Career education further integrated throughout co-curriculum by student affairs practitioners trained with knowledge in this area	Practitioners develop new mechanisms for providing student support in non-place-based learning contexts
Practice-in-transition	Hypothesis testing utilised to determine optimal interventions and strategies that facilitate effective school-to-work transition	Practices for optimising learning in distance environments continuously discussed and measurement of interventions negotiated by experts
Hybrid professionalism	Practitioners work in concert with employers and governments in order to provide students with accurate and up-to-date employment information	Practitioners work with policy-makers and external constituencies to inform decisions regarding student support services and expansion of distance learning services

Hypotheses need to be tested and research conducted in order to arrive at practicable solutions to the complex problem of how to help students make the successful transition from school to work in African nations. Practitioners should also be prepared to work in concert with professionals beyond higher education in order to assess employer needs and provide students with the most up-to-date possible information on country-specific economic trends. These partnerships are especially important in ensuring that students are knowledgeable about the linkages between education, employment opportunities and employer expectations of post-secondary graduates in their home region (African Economic Outlook, 2012).

Second, the professionalising field of student affairs in Africa possesses the capacity to revamp the delivery of career education and chart a new course forward. A recent US paper advances the idea that career education can become a mission-centric focal point of post-secondary institutions not only housed in career services but also thoroughly incorporated into both the in-class curriculum and out-of-class co-curriculum (Chan & Derry, 2013). Speaking directly to career counselling practice in an African nation, South Africa, Watson and McMahon (2009) further argue:

The responsibility for addressing and redressing the limitations of career counseling in higher education does not rest with career counselors alone. In this regard, there is an opportunity for career counselors to show proactive leadership by initiating and coordinating a systemic response that involves higher education policy makers, professional bodies, practitioners, researchers, and those who train new professionals to the field. (p. 479)

In their role as collaborative educators (Blake, 2007), student affairs practitioners may become catalysts for change within their institutions as they both develop and implement professional practices that optimise the role higher education can play in economic development. Moreover, I believe that training of new practitioners must include education regarding career development to ensure that this knowledge is widespread rather than siloed.

### ***Distance learning***

Distance learning, whether taking place online or through other forms of communication, is quickly being adopted as a key form of education delivery in Africa (Asunka, 2008; Lephala & Makoe, 2012; Simmons *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the use of distance learning is being championed as a primary method for increasing access to higher education to meet the demand brought on both by the booming youth population and the 21st century global economy (Agbor, Taiwo & Smith, 2012; Asunka, 2008; Lephala & Makoe, 2012; Simmons *et al.*, 2011).

Student affairs services and practitioners can certainly play an important role in the lives of learners as education increasingly leaves campus (Ibara, 2012). However, provisions for these services are not always made or resourced (Dare, Zapata & Thomas, 2005), often to the direct disadvantage of student learning and success (Lephala & Makoe, 2012; Asunka, 2008). A recent qualitative study on students pursuing distance learning through UNISA in South Africa (*Ibid.*) revealed deep concerns among students with regard to their learning environment, the socio-cultural aspects of their education, and educational costs. Central to these issues was a lack of institutional support to help students create communities of learning even if they were far from campus. As one learner from a rural area expressed, “It seems that we are forgotten by the institution. Nobody even knows that we exist. Living far from the university is a big problem” (p. 4). Perhaps the best people in the institution to ‘remember’ this student and others in her situation are student affairs practitioners.

One way to ensure student affairs practitioners are sensitive to the needs of distance learners is to hardwire this conversation into their training and continued development. I believe that the model for professionalisation as proposed meets this demand in two distinct ways (Table 2). First, the model provides the flexibility necessary to reconceptualise the delivery of student support services to better meet the wide variety of learning contexts present in Africa today (Ibara, 2012). In terms of distance learning, practitioners may develop ways to ensure students feel supported as part of the educational community even if they never set foot on campus (Dare, Zapata & Thomas, 2005). These services may include the creation of positions solely targeted at engaging distance learners, the development of modules that cover university culture and success, the use of modern technologies to facilitate communication between distance learners and college staff, and perhaps even the creation of remote learning centres staffed by student affairs professionals.

Second, as these services are implemented and resources managed to address the question of how to best engage distance learners, further research must be performed and the success of interventions evaluated. This research may, in turn, inform the development of practices that better meet the needs of students studying in online and offline distance environments, as well as students working in the variety of learning scenarios and cultures present in modern-day Africa. Research could also contribute to conversations taking place between institutions and external revenue sources regarding how to best leverage 21st century technologies to increase educational completion and provide more members of Africa's 'youth bulge' with the skills needed to compete in both regional markets (African Economic Outlook, 2012) and the global knowledge economy (Agbor, Taiwo & Smith, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

I have presented a model that can guide the continued professionalisation of student affairs in Africa. I believe this model, with its cornerstones of dynamism and flexibility, can assist both African professionals and the African student affairs profession in their work. I also hope that this model encourages new and veteran practitioners to see student affairs as an arena charged not only with addressing challenges that exist, but also one capable of creatively responding to the many robust opportunities present in 21st century post-secondary educational environments. Especially in the areas of career education and distance learning, African practitioners trained to be adaptive and collaborative may very well chart courses that will inspire the international student affairs community to reinvent practices in the name of greater student success and access.

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